

11

(Chakka) Maraṇassati Sutta 1

Or Paṭhama (Chakka) Maraṇassati Sutta

The First (Sixes) Discourse on the Mindfulness of Death | A 6.19

Theme: The meditation on death should be done with every breath

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2013, 2015

1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.1 The (Chakka) Maraṇassati Sutta 1 (A 6.19), which gives the key list of 6 ways of cultivating it,¹ is a shorter version of **the (Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇassati Sutta 1** (A 8.73), which lists 8 ways of cultivating the mindfulness of death, that is, it has these additional factors:

(3) living for only half a day, and

(5) living for just the time it takes to eat half an alms-meal.

1.2 In both Suttas, all except the last two methods, are declared by the Buddha to be not as effective as the last two methods [§§21-22].

1.3 The closing sections (§§17-22) of **the (Chakka) Maraṇassati Sutta 1** (A 6.19), the shorter of the two Suttas, are quoted in the Visuddhi, magga in its chapter on the mindfulness of death (Vism 8.36 f/237 f).² They illustrate the practice of the mindfulness of death by way of the brevity of the human condition, which is the seventh of the 8 methods it prescribes.³

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The First (Sixes) Discourse on the Mindfulness of Death

A 6.19

The Buddha exhorts the monks

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the brick house⁴ at Nāḍika [Ñātika].⁵

2 There, the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Bhikshus!” **[303]**

“Bhante!”⁶ the monks replied to the Blessed One in assent.

¹ A 6.19 @ SD 48.11.

² SD 48.18.

³ The 8 methods for practising mindfulness of death are (1) it is like the appearance of a murderer, (2) it is like the ruin of success, (3) by comparing oneself to others, (4) the sharing of the body with many, (5) the frailty of life, (6) being signless, (7), the brevity of life; and (8) the shortness of the moment. (Vism 8,36 f/237 f), SD 49,18.

⁴ **The brick house** (*giṇṇak’āvasatha*) is mentioned in **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,2.5/2:91 + 2.10/2:96), SD 9; **Jana,vasabha S** (D 18,1/2:200), SD 62.3; **Cūḷa Go,siṅga S** (M 31,1/1:205), SD 41.11; V 1:232. It is specially mentioned because generally other buildings are made of wood (MA 2:235).

⁵ **Nāḍikā** or **Ñātikā** (according to Buddhaghosa, two villages of the same name on the same river bank) was on the highroad between Kuṭṭigrahama and Vaiśālī (V 1:230 ff; D 2:90 f, 200; M 1:205). The Buddha’s instructions to Ānanda given here are also recorded in the Saṃyutta, which has **Ñātika** as the place-name (S 5:356 ff.). Comys to both the Dīgha and the Saṃyutta confirm it as “Ñātika,” explaining that “There were two villages close by the same pond, inhabited by the sons of two brothers. Thus, both of them were called Ñātika (‘of the relatives’)” (DA 2:543; SA 2:74).

⁶ *Bhante* (“sir”) is a very common vocative in the Nikāyas, used by juniors to address seniors, or workers their employers: see Geiger, *A Pāli Grammar*, 2000 §98.3. Although it is more commonly used amongst monastics and to monastics, it is also often used amongst the laity to address seniors or respected people (pace Warder, *Introduction*

3 Bhikshus, the mindfulness of death, when cultivated, grown, is of great fruit, great benefit, plunging towards nirvana, whose goal is nirvana.⁷

4 You, bhikshus, cultivate the mindfulness of death!”⁸

The monks’ responses⁹

5 (1) When this was said, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

“I, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

6 “But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?”

“Here, bhante, I do it thus:

‘Indeed, should I live only a night and a day,¹⁰

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’¹¹

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

7 (2) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

“I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

8 “But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?”

“Here, bhante, I do it thus:

‘Indeed, should I live only a day,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

9 (3) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

“I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

10 “But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?”

“Here, bhante, I do it thus:

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to eat a single alms-meal,¹²

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’

to Pali, 2nd ed, 1974:170). *Bhadante* (sometimes *bhaddante*) prob comes from *bhaddam* or *bhadram* (“auspicious”), commonly contracted to *bhante*. There is a late form *bhadanto* (Miln 25). See D Andersen, *A Pāli Glossary*, 1901: 191 sv *bhadanta*. See SD 4.9 (5).

⁷ *Marāṇa-s, sati bhikkhave bhāvitā bahulī, katā maha-p, phalā hoti mahānisamsā amat’ogadhā amata, pariyosānā*. Significantly, the mindfulness of death, properly done, can lead to the attaining of nirvana: see (***)

⁸ *Bhāvētha no tumhe bhikkhave marāṇassatin’ti*.

⁹ For details on each of these 6 conditions, see SD 48.5 (1.2).

¹⁰ Cf A 8.73,7 ad loc (SD 48.5), where Bodhi, quoting the Chinese parallel, EĀ 40.8, says that it is in substantial agreement with Comy (AA 3:351 ad A 6.19: see foll n). Thus, EĀ records the first monk as saying: “When I contemplate the perception of death, I wish to live on for seven days to contemplate the 7 awakening-factors, which is to greatly benefit from the Tathagata’s teaching, so that I’ll have no regrets at death.” 思維死想時。意欲存七日。思維七覺意。於如來法中多所饒益。死後無恨。 *Sī wéi sī xiǎng shí, yì yù cún qī rì, sī wéi qī jué yì, yú rúlái fǎ zhōng duō suǒ ráo yì, sī hòu wú hèn*. (EA 40.8 @ T1.741c26-742b2). The phrase 死後 (lit “after dying”) is idiomatic. The Chin tr differs from Bodhi’s, which has “(and) after death I will have no regrets,” which sounds odd (A:B 1753 n1284).

¹¹ *Aho vatāham rattin, divaṃ jīveyyaṃ, bhagavato sāsanam manasi kareyyaṃ, bahuṃ* [Ee; Be Ce Se *bahu*] *vata me kataṃ assāti*. Comy here: “Much should be done by us in the teaching” (*tumhākaṃ sāsanam māma kiccaṃ bahu kataṃ assa*, AA 3:351), ie, much indeed would be done of the renunciant’s duties, which would be to my benefit (*bahu vata mayā ata, hitaṃ pabbajita, kiccaṃ kataṃ bhavēyya* AAT:Be 3:98).

¹² Comy notes that the almsfood should be sufficient to sustain him for a day (*ekam divasaṃ yāpana-p-pahonakam piṇḍapātam*, AAT:Be 3:98). Following the context or drift of the Sutta, we must say that (1) he would reflect on the mindfulness of death while he is taking his day’s meal, and (2) he would reflect that his meal would only sustain him for a day, and if he keeps on missing his meal (say, for more than a week), he would surely die. Cf (**Aṭṭhaka**) **Marāṇa, sati S** (A 8.74): “My food might not agree with me...that would be the death of me, or, this would be an obstacle to me!” (A 8.74,6), SD 48.6. Cf Bodhi’s interpretation at A:B 1753 n1286.

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

11 (4) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

“I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

12 “*But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?*”

“*Here, bhante, I do it thus:*

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow four or five morsels,¹³

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much [305] indeed would be done by me!’

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

13 (5) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

“I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

14 “*But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?*”

“*Here, bhante, I do it thus:*

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow a single morsel,¹⁴

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

15 (6) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

“I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

16 “*Here, bhante, I do it thus:*

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to breathe in and then out, to breathe out and then in,¹⁵

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death.”

The Buddha’s response¹⁶

17 When this was said, the Blessed One said this to the monks:

(1) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live only a night and a day,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’

(2) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live only a day,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’

(3) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to eat a single alms-meal,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’ and

(4) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow four or five morsels,¹⁷

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!— [308]

18 those monks, bhikshus, are said to dwell without diligence.

They (only) slowly cultivate the mindfulness of death for the destruction of the influxes.¹⁸

¹³ *Idha mayham bhante evam hoti “aho vatāham tad-antaram jīveyyam, yad-antaram cattāro pañca ālope saṅkhāditvā ajjhoharāmi.*

¹⁴ *Idha mayham bhante evam hoti “aho vatāham tad-antaram jīveyyam, yad-antaram ekam ālopaṃ saṅkhāditvā ajjhoharāmi.*

¹⁵ *Idha mayham bhante evam hoti “aho vatāham tad-antaram jīveyyam, yad-antaram assasitvā vā passasāmi, passasitvā vā assasāmi.*

¹⁶ §§23-30 is qu at **Vism** as the way to practise mindfulness of death (Vism 8.36 f/237 f).

¹⁷ *Idha mayham bhante evam hoti “aho vatāham tad-antaram jīveyyam, yad-antaram cattāro pañca ālope saṅkhāditvā ajjhoharāmi.*

19 But, bhikshus, as for that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

(5) ‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow a single morsel,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’

20 (6) And, bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to breathe in and then out, to breathe out and then in,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’—

21 Those monks, bhikshus, are said to dwell diligently.

They keenly cultivate the mindfulness of death for the destruction of the influxes.¹⁹

22 Therefore, bhikshus, train yourself thus:

‘We will dwell diligently. We will keenly cultivate the mindfulness of death for the destruction of the influxes.’

Thus, bhikshus, you should train yourself.”

— evaṃ —

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¹⁸ Both sentences: *Ime vuccanti bhikkhave bhikkhū pamattā viharanti, dandham maraṇa-s,satiṃ bhāventi āsavānaṃ khayāya*. There are the 4 influxes (*āsava*), those of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijj’āsava*). The destruction of influxes (*āsava-k,khaya*) is synonymous with the attaining of arhathood. See 30.3 (1.3.2).

¹⁹ Both sentences: *Ime vuccanti bhikkhave bhikkhū appamattā viharanti, tikkham maraṇa-s,satiṃ bhāventi āsavānaṃ khayāya*.